

It's getting harder for kids to move up the economic ladder. He's got ideas how to fix that.

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The percentage of Americans earning more than their parents did at the same age has plunged over the past 50 years, [especially in Illinois and other Midwestern states](#). For Chicago-area residents to improve their ability to move up the economic ladder, we must change our education and employment systems, says Lazaro Lopez, chair of the Illinois Community College Board.

He will be a panelist on the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's [July 19 forum on the future of economic opportunity](#). It's part of an effort to engage community members as the agency prepares to develop its 2050 regional plan.

Lopez talked to Blue Sky about what residents need to do now to help our children be better prepared to work in the future.

Q: Some people argue that the American Dream is dying. How do you see it?

A: The rules of the road for success in America have changed, but we're still operating in a system that worked for our parents and grandparents. Often, we thought students turned 18, became adults and they could go out and start discovering their future.

That might still work for some, particularly those who are more affluent. For others living in poverty, they may not have that luxury. What we have to do is to streamline all of those processes to start earlier.

Q: What's the biggest factor hindering people's ability to move up economically?

A: Often what happens — and from my personal experience — is you don't know what you don't know. Technology provides exposure for the world to open up to students. However, when you are young and a student in poverty, your world revolves entirely around your neighborhood. You don't have an aunt and uncle who are engineers and take you to work or a parent to expose you to other opportunities. It's public schools that need to bring the world to students.

Our focus has been on bringing the academic world to students, and that sufficed. But now we need to expand academics with a full economic opportunity beyond that neighborhood so students can see what is possible.

We need students graduating at 18 and moving into careers having already had experiences we would have expected from college students, including some credentials, internships and experience that set them up to enter into a career field. It starts them in paths that are family-sustainable and living wages.

Q: You're also associate superintendent for teaching and learning for High School District 214 in the northwest suburbs. How is your district working to solve that?

A: We have partnerships with higher ed and with business partners across the Chicago region to ensure our students graduate having identified a career area of interest, having earned some early college credit, and where possible, some early credentials and intern experience that affirms that choice. We're doing this within a 68-mile region and across 12,000 students and 950-plus business partners.

We have the Center for Career Discovery that began last year. The entire focus is that every student has a workplace learning experience before they graduate high school.

Q: In the future, how can we address obstacles to higher education for students who live in poverty?

I think part of the answer is by redefining that senior year of high school and moving some of those general education and higher education courses so you can easily take care of about a quarter of your higher-ed costs. I imagine the trend will be for students staying more locally so they don't have to stay on campus and save costs that way. There are lots of universities experimenting with both online and cohorts closer to home. I think that's going to continue to grow. You'll see more students accessing higher end in non-traditional means.

We need to figure out ways to significantly lower the cost and time to degree completion. Our post-high school institutions should be developing three-year bachelor degree programs, partnering with both community colleges and high schools to allow students to earn their degrees faster and, in essence, at a lower cost.

Q: A University of Chicago report said that people are aware of the equality gap but don't care. How do we get people to care?

A: The driver of change is going to be from businesses recognizing that they won't have a viable employee pool unless they solve the problem of upward mobility in both economic and educational opportunity. You can't grow a business on less than half of your incoming population because they're living in poverty.

If businesses sound the alarms, people will begin to pay attention.

Q-and-A's are edited for clarity and length.

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